

Russian Troop Movements and Tensions Along the Ukrainian Border

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In [mid-October 2021](#), [social media and news outlets](#) began [reporting](#) significant movement by Russian military forces, with [limited Russian transparency](#), on or near the Ukrainian border and within Ukraine's occupied Crimea region. These movements, which follow a similar military buildup in March-April 2021 and Russia's [Zapad military exercises](#) in September 2021, have come amid [increasingly aggressive rhetoric](#) reported from Russian policymakers about the so-called encroachment of [NATO near Russia's borders and the geopolitical status of Ukraine](#). This [rhetoric](#) has continued despite new bilateral negotiations between the United States and Russia, as well as [joint meetings](#) with NATO and within the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), in January 2022. On January 14, Ukraine was hit by a cyberattack that [many observers](#) attributed to Russia. That same day, the [Biden administration accused Russia](#) of sending saboteurs to Ukraine "to have the option of fabricating a pretext for invasion." Many [observers](#) and [policymakers](#), including some in Congress, have expressed concerns about a possible new Russian invasion of Ukraine or other aggressive actions.

Russian Troop Deployments

Many analysts and officials characterize Russia's recent military buildup as significant and as falling outside normal troop rotations or military exercises, due to the deployment of units over long distances and far away from their usual training grounds. Of particular concern is the movement and pre-positioning of equipment closer to the Ukrainian border, which is difficult and time-consuming to transport. Pre-positioned equipment allows Russian units to [quickly mobilize and conduct operations](#). One possible indicator of an imminent Russian operation would be the large-scale movement of personnel to staff and operate pre-positioned equipment.

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Figure 1. Russian Borders with Ukraine and Belarus



Source: Congressional Research Service.

Media reporting has documented Russia's shift of equipment and units (including Iskander-M Short Range Ballistic Missile and heavy artillery systems) from the 41st Combined Arms Army (CAA) from the Central Military District, headquartered in Novosibirsk, Siberia, to Yelnya, on Belarus's eastern border (see **Figure 1**).

On December 3, the *Washington Post* reported that U.S. intelligence estimated the presence of some 75,000 Russian troops near Ukraine and in occupied Crimea and reported on Russian plans that would involve the "extensive movement of 100 battalion tactical groups with an estimated 175,000 personnel, along with armor, artillery, and equipment."

Since that time, Russia has **continued** to build up its forces in the region. Open source reporting indicates Russia has **anywhere** from 50 to 60 Battalion Tactical Groups (BTG), near Ukraine or in occupied Crimea, and that number is likely to increase in the coming weeks. **Media reporting** indicates Russia has moved helicopter and air assets, which are **crucial** to support a potential offensive, closer to the border. Russia can also quickly mobilize and move **Airborne (VDV)** and Naval Infantry BTGs to augment and spearhead its operations.

Analysts and media outlets have **reported** the movement of elements of the 1st Guards Tank Army (based outside Moscow) and the 6th CAA (based outside St. Petersburg) to areas on Ukraine's northeast border near Voronezh. Reports also have noted the **increased movement** of units from the 49th and 58th CAAs toward Ukraine's southeast border and the Russia-controlled regions of eastern Ukraine. Troops from Russia's Southern Military District have conducted **military exercises** in occupied Crimea and have **moved** artillery and BTGs into the peninsula. Some analysts are concerned Russia may be **transporting** more landing ships to the Black Sea Fleet to support potential amphibious operations, although other analysts are **skeptical** of the likelihood of amphibious landings.

Beginning in early January 2022, Russia has **transported** multiple BTGs, air defense, and artillery units from its Eastern Military District and claimed their movement was part of a "sudden check of combat readiness check." Other media reporting noted the movement of **support, logistics, and Iskander-M units**. On January 18, Belarusian and Russian officials **announced** these units would participate in **joint Belarus-Russian** military exercises from February 9 to February 20 and would include **air defense and fighter assets**. Some analysts are **concerned** Russia's concentration of forces in Belarus and occupied Crimea is intended to undermine Ukraine's defenses by forcing it to divide its forces and guard against multiple potential offensive points.

Russian Force Posture

These reinforcements add to an already robust and permanent Russian military presence established on the border with Ukraine and occupied Crimea. Since 2014, Russia has created new units in the Western and Southern Military Districts on the border with Ukraine. Russia also has created two new armies, the 20th CAA in the Western Military District and the 8th CAA in the Southern Military District, to oversee, coordinate, and manage command and control of units transported to the border during a crisis or conflict.

In the **Western Military District**, covering the northern border with Ukraine and Belarus's eastern border, the 20th CAA (headquartered in Voronezh) is assessed to consist of two maneuver units: the 144th and 3rd Motor Rifle Divisions. In the **Southern Military District**, Russia established the 8th CAA (headquartered in

Rostov-on-Don and Novochoerkassk), which is assessed to consist of the 150th and the 20th Motor Rifle Division. The 8th CAA also reportedly commands separatist units in Donetsk and Luhansk inside Ukraine. Both CAAs have support, artillery, air defense, and electronic warfare units.

Russia's military capabilities in occupied Crimea center on (1) the Black Sea Fleet and (2) ground, air, and coastal defense units focused on defending the peninsula and denying freedom of movement to Ukrainian and foreign actors. Observers consider Russia's military forces in Crimea under status quo conditions to be primarily defensively oriented. Russian ground forces are concentrated under the 22nd Army Corps. Other units include the 810th marine infantry brigade and a new airborne regiment.

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